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ABSTRACT

The last decade and a half was dominated by the view that schools do not matter, that schooling makes no difference, and that schools are powerless to change their students' destinies. Current research throws new light on these issues and prompts a questioning of these values. Recent studies present evidence that school experiences can indeed have an effect and give indications of what particular features of school organizations and functions make for success. Traditional public policy approaches to the study of schools dealt primarily with facilities and resources. Coleman's contribution was to document the importance of the social setting of the school. However, the fundamental challenge to Coleman's findings stems from his omission of what actually goes on in the school. Several studies provide evidence that schools can make a considerable difference. They provide substantive material in support of schools as effective institutions and help bring some balance into a debate which has tipped against education and schools as functioning tools of social change. (Author/RLV)

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THE ROLE SCHOOLS CAN AND DO PLAY: A REAPPRAISAL IN LIGHT OF RECENT RESEARCH

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THE ROLE SCHOOLS CAN AND DO PLAY: A REAPPRAISAL IN LIGHT OF RECENT RESEARCH

The last decade and a half was dominated by the view that schools don't matter, that schooling makes no difference, and that schools are powerless to change their students' destiny. This trend began, in essence, with the publication of the Coleman Report in 1966.[1] Current research throws new light on these issues and prompts a questioning of these views. Recent studies present evidence that school experiences can indeed have an effect, and give indications of what particular features of school organizations and functions make for success.

As a result, we view some of Coleman's findings quite differently now than when first published. A brief reappraisal of the study, which follows, will provide a background for the more recent work and findings and their implications.

The Coleman Report was an integral part of the 1960s, a period dominated by social activism, the "War on Poverty", and a national commitment to try to overcome the injustices associated with poverty and race. It was the second largest social science project ever undertaken.[2] More than 645,000 pupils were involved, together with 60,000 teachers, and information on the facilities of 4,000 schools was gathered. Its impact on peoples' view of the role of schools, the power of schools, and on public attitudes to expenditures of funds for education was enormous.

The Report was commissioned and submitted in response to Section 402 of the Civil Rights Act of 1964:

SEC. 402. The Commissioner shall conduct a survey and make a report to the President and the Congress, within two years of the enactment of this title, concerning the lack of availability of equal educational opportunities for individuals by reason of race, color, religion, or national origin in public educational institutions at all levels in the United States, its territories and possessions, and the District of Columbia.

The Report addressed itself to four major questions:

1. To what extent are racial and ethnic groups segregated in the public schools?

   The great majority of American children, it found, attend schools that are largely segregated. Among minority groups (Puerto Ricans, Indian Americans, Mexican Americans, Oriental Americans and Negroes), Negroes are by far the most segregated.

2. Do the schools offer equal educational opportunity in terms of tangible characteristics such as laboratories, textbooks and libraries; teacher preparation, experience and salaries; characteristics of students such as their socio-economic background or the education of their parents?[2]

The Report found that minorities, on the whole, attend schools which were less well equipped and ranked lower in terms of the criteria listed. However, these differences were less great than had been expected, and inequality in access to resources was less than many had assumed. Regional differences were large and sometimes exceeded national differences.

3. How much do students learn as measured by their performance on standardized achievement tests?

The average minority student scored considerably lower than the average white pupils.

4. What is the relationship between student achievement and the kinds of schools they attend?

The Report found student achievement strongly related not to facilities or teacher characteristics, but to students' socio-economic background, to the educational background and aspiration of peers, and to the degree of control

students feel over their destiny. For Negroes, the locus of control factor was related to the proportion of whites in the school. These last findings were unexpected, had great impact, and gave strong impetus to continue and strengthen efforts to integrate the public schools.

Tangible school characteristics measured were found to have little impact on achievement; teacher characteristics measured somewhat more impact; and both tangible school and teacher characteristics had more impact on minority students' achievement than on white students' achievement.

Further, the Report noted, that when students' socio-economic background is taken into account, schools are remarkably similar in how they relate to achievement of pupils. Subsequent criticism of the Report and recent research raise serious questions about this finding.

Finally, by measuring the achievement levels of the various groups on the first grade and on the twelfth grade, the report found that for most minority groups, and most particularly the Negro, schools provide little opportunity to overcome the initial deficiency with which they start; in fact they fall farther behind.

The Report did not recommend what to do. This had not been asked.

Now, over a decade later, the contributions the Report made remain significant, but they are seen more clearly as shedding light on merely one aspect of the complex problem of equality of educational opportunity.

A discussion of schools, or an attempt to change or improve schools, must consider three major areas: 1) the physical facilities, and resources such as numbers of teachers, laboratories, texts used, etc., 2) the social setting: socio-economic background, integration, and school environment, and 3) what goes on in school: school

processes, school aims and school activities. The traditional public policy approach had concerned itself primarily with the first group: buildings, equipment, number of teachers, etc.. This was the context in which the doctrine of "separate but equal" evolved. Equal opportunity was equated with equal facilities. Coleman's significant contribution was to document the importance of the second area, the social setting and the students' background. A sociologist, his emphasis and interest focused on the respective role of school factors versus non-school factors, and he effectively drew public attention to the importance of social and economic influences, and their effect on achievement.

Also, he redefined the concept of equal educational opportunity. Prior to the Coleman Report it had been defined in terms of <u>input</u>: facilities, money spent, etc.. The Report extended this concept. An appraisal of equal opportunity, he pointed out, requires looking at <u>output</u>, the outcomes of schooling, such as degree of student achievement and distribution of student achievement. This extended the

context of the original question and broadened the area of public responsibility.

He did not emphasize or address himself sufficiently to the third area, to what goes on in school. Coleman dealt primarily with broad, aggregated data. Because he did not look at individual schools or attempt to analyze in-school events or processes, the differences between individual schools and their effectiveness were neglected. The accomplishments of individual schools were lost in the overall results. This led to misinterpretation and a belittling of the role schools can and do play.

The Coleman findings were used and misused. Those favoring integration stressed the data showing that minorities achieved better in integrated than in segregated schools. This had indeed been a finding, but the findings had not suggested that changing the student mix alone would bring about improved results. A recent survey of the literature by St. John[3] corroborates this, and concludes that

integration alone has little effect on pupil performance. Integration alone, therefore, in many instances, did not produce the expected or desired results, or at least not promptly.

But integration, in most instances, required bussing. As controversies over this arose, Coleman himself entered the debate when he questioned the usefulness of forced bussing as a method to bring about integration.[4] This debate, heated and much publicized, however, did not deal with or question any of the basic findings of the report. It dealt with the effectiveness and validity of public policies adopted in light of the findings, and designed to bring about integration.

An unwarranted and unfortunate consequence of the Report was a strengthening of the belief that 'schools don't make any difference'. The Report had found that the aggregate effect of non-school factors on achievement exceeded that of school factors. Children in the initial grades were found to differ widely in their level of skills and cognitive abilities. The schools thereafter do not close the gap. It was not stated that the schools <u>could not</u> do this. But

individual schools which may have accomplished this were submerged in the aggregated data. In line with this school-impotence approach, Coleman is quoted frequently in support of policies which seek to reduce school budgets. This does not seem justified. As Cremin pointed out, the real significance of the Report was not that the school is powerless, but that family and peers are powerful.[5]

Linked with the view that "schools don't matter" grew the attitude that responsibility for educational outcomes rests with society, and with pupils and their parents, rather than the schools. Jencks subsequent research and writings further supported this position. School quality, Jencks maintained, has little effect on achievement or on economic success.[6] As a result, less was demanded and expected of schools, and particularly of schools which served the poor.

The methodology and design of the study was criticized by a number of researchers, notably Armour, Bowles and Levin, Cain and Watts, Hanushek and Kain, and Smith.[7] The manner in which certain

data were used was questioned and segments were reanalyzed. None of this criticism, however, seriously denigrated the importance, scope and overall contribution of the Report.

The fundamental challenge to the Coleman findings stems from his exclusive use of aggregated data. The success of individual schools and the reasons for it, what enabled them to counter the general trend, neglect of this whole area led to the resulting misinterpretation of his findings, namely that schools are powerless. A number of recent studies show that school variables can be highly significant, and can outweigh and overcome the disadvantage children bring to school. Schools, in other words, can make a difference. Weber and the NYS Office of Performance Review, for instance, studied various aspects of schools attended by disadvantaged children, identified schools among them that consistently achieved about national norms, and identified characteristics related to their success.[8] Among these were strong administrative leadership, high expectations for students on the part of teachers, and emphasis on cognitive

skills, particularly reading. Research published by a British group headed by Michael Rutter[9] represents the most recent, thorough and extensive effort in this area. A longitudinal study, which follows a cohort of children from primary through secondary schools, it covered a smaller number of schools but in greater depth than the broad surveys of Coleman and Jencks.

The Rutter group focused on schools, school aims and school activities, and chose 12 non-selective, inner-city London secondary schools for study. They sought first to ascertain and measure

- The characteristics of the pupils when they enter,
- The process of schooling in each school, i.e. the social organization, types of environments for learning, teacher attitudes, teaching styles, rules and policies, as observed in classes and through questionnaires and interviews,
- The outcomes of schooling. These included children's behavior in school, attendance, examination success (academic attainment), employment after leaving school, and delinquency,
- Ecological influences, i.e. the influence of the physical and social setting on the schools.

The Rutter group found that secondary schools in similar areas, with comparable groups of students, varied markedly with respect to their pupils' behavior, attendance, exam success and delinquency. This had been observed before, but the demonstration that these differences remained even after taking into account differences in their intake was new. This suggested that, contrary to many views, including the findings of Coleman, secondary schools do have an important influence on their pupils behavior and attainment.

The study describes, for example, what it calls School A and School B, in each of which one-third of the incoming 10-year-olds had exhibited behavior problems, such as truancy, vandalism or insubordination. Four years later, fewer than 10 percent of the boys at School A had behavior problems, whereas the proportion at School B had risen to 48 percent. One school apparently was doing the right thing and the other was not. In other words, the school did make a difference.

The Rutter group then attempted to see whether there was any relationship between physical aspects of the schools, administrative features, school processes and outcomes. The term school processes, as mentioned, was used to refer to those features of the social organization of school life which create the context for teaching and learning, and which seem likely to affect the nature of the school experience for both staff and pupils. They include concerns such as academic emphasis, teacher actions in lessons, rewards and punishments, pupil conditions, pupils' responsibilities and participation, stability of teaching and friendship groups, staff organization, and skills of teachers.

The research showed which school variables were associated with good behavior and academic attainments and which were not. The differences between schools in outcome were systematically related to their characteristics as social institutions. Factors as varied as the degree of ~~academic attainments and which were not. The differences between schools in outcome were systematically related to~~

~~their characteristics as social institutions. Factors as varied as the degree of~~ academic emphasis, teacher actions in lessons, the availability of incentives and rewards, good conditions for pupils (freedom during class breaks, outings, care of the classroom), and the extent to which children were able to take responsibility were all positively and significantly associated with outcome differences between schools. The Rutter findings further suggest that not only were pupils influenced by the way they were dealt with as individuals, but also that there was a group influence resulting from the ethos of a school institution. In all instances these factors were open to modification by the staff, rather than fixed external constraints.

Outcomes were also influenced by factors <u>outside</u> teachers' immediate control. The academic balance in the intakes to the schools was particularly important in this connection. Examination success tended to be better in schools with a substantial nucleus of children of at least average intellectual ability, and delinquency rates were

higher in those with a heavy preponderance of the least able. To a certain extent, this corroborated Coleman, who drew attention to the importance of student mix and peer influence earlier.

The Rutter study concluded that the results carry the strong implication that schools can do much to foster good behavior and attainments, and that even in a disadvantaged area, school can be a force for the good.

A more detailed summary of Rutter's findings is shown in Appendix A.

The approach taken by the Rutter group extended previous research done on equality of educational opportunity, the role of schools and school effectiveness in two important ways. First, Rutter's concern centered on <u>change</u> in student behavior and attainment which occurred during the school years. Coleman himself recently drew attention to the need for work in this area when he stated: "the principal villain (in the statistical analyses) is the fact that student populations in different schools differ at the outset...because of this difference, it is not possible merely to judge

the quality of a school by the achievements of the students leaving it. It is necessary to control in some way for the variations in student input with which the teachers and the staff of the school are confronted. In some way, it is the increment in achievement that the school provides which should be the measure of the school's quality.[10] The Rutter study concentrated on precisely this, the increment in achievement and changes which occurred during the school years, and the differences between individual schools.

Second, variables such as the process of schooling and, in addition to examination success, outcomes such as children's behavior, or attendance, were emphasized. These have received less attention recently than the effect of social and economic influences on cognitive development and achievement.

As a result of recent work, Rutter's and the other studies mentioned earlier, we now question Coleman's finding, that schools are remarkably similar in the way they relate to student achievement

when socio-economic background is taken into account. Schools, the recent work shows, can make a difference.

On the whole, though, the recent findings are seen not so much as contradicting Coleman's but as throwing light on aspects which Coleman, and later Jencks, did not consider. Coleman drew attention to the importance of non-school factors. His findings were important and shed important new light, but they addressed only a part of the equation. The subsequent studies do not deny the importance of non-school factors, but concentrate on school processes, schools as social institutions, and changes during the school years. Studied in this context, the findings show that schools can make a considerable difference. They thus provide substantive material in support of schools as effective institutions, and help bring some balance into a debate which had tipped against education and schools as functioning tools of social change.

APPENDIX A

RUTTER STUDY

Findings were summarized by the group as follows:

First, secondary schools in inner London differed markedly in the behaviour and attainments shown by their pupils. This was evident in the children's behaviour whilst at school (as observed by us as well as reported by teachers and by the pupils themselves), the regularity of their attendance, the proportions staying on at school beyond the legally enforced period, their success in public examinations, and their delinquency rates.

Second, although schools differed in the proportion of behaviourally difficult or low achieving children they admitted, these differences did not wholly account for the variations between schools in their pupils' later behaviour and attainment. Even when comparisons between schools were restricted to children who were quite similar in family background and personal characteristics prior to secondary transfer, marked school variations remained. This meant that children were more likely to show good behaviour and good scholastic attainments if they attended some schools than if they attended others. The implication is that experiences during the secondary school years may influence children's progress.

Third, the variations between schools in different forms of "outcome" for their pupils were reasonably stable over periods of at least four or five years.

Fourth, in general, schools performed fairly similarly on all the various measures of outcome. That is, schools which did better than average in terms of the children's behaviour in school tended also to do better than average in terms of examination success and delinquency. There were some exceptions to this pattern, but it appeared that in most schools the different forms of success were closely connected.

Fifth, these differences in outcome between schools were not due to such physical factors as the size of the school, the age of the buildings or the space available; nor were they due to broad differences in administrative status or organisation. It was entirely possible for schools to obtain good outcomes in spite of initially rather unpromising and unprepossessing school premises, and within the context of somewhat differing administrative arrangements.

APPENDIX A (cont'd)

Sixth, the differences between schools in outcome were systematically related to their characteristics as social institutions. Factors as varied as the degree of academic emphasis, teacher actions in lessons, the availability of incentives and rewards, good conditions for pupils, and the extent to which children were able to take responsibility were all significantly associated with outcome differences between schools. All of these factors were open to modification by the staff, rather than fixed by external constraints.

Seventh, outcomes were also influenced by factors outside teachers' immediate control. The academic balance in the intakes to the schools was particularly important in this connection. Examination success tended to be better in schools with a substantial nucleus of children of at least average intellectual ability, and delinquency rates were higher in those with a heavy preponderance of the least able. Interestingly, however, while the balance of intake was significantly associated with pupil outcome, it did not appear to have any comparable influence on school functioning, as reflected in our school process measures.

Eighth, this effect of balance in the intake was most marked with respect to delinquency, and least important in the case of the children's observed behaviour in the classroom and elsewhere about the school.

Ninth, the association between the combined measure of overall school process and each of the measures of outcome was much stronger than any of the associations with individual process variables. This suggests that the cumulative effect of these various social factors was considerably greater than the effect of any of the individual factors on their own. The implication is that the individual actions or measures may combine to create a particular ethos, or set of values, attitudes and behaviours which will become characteristic of the school as a whole.

Tenth, the total pattern of findings indicates the strong probability that the associations between school process and outcome reflect in part a causal process. In other words, to an appreciable extent children's behaviour and attitudes are shaped and influenced by their experiences at school and, in particular, by the qualities of the school as a social institution.

FOOTNOTES

1. James S. Coleman et al, Equality of Educational Opportunity, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, (Washington, D.C.: 1966), Superintendent of Documents No. FS 5.238:38001.

2. Project Talent, undertaken in 1950, was the largest.

3. Nancy H. St. John, School Desegregation: Outcomes for Children, (New York: Wiley, 1975.)

4. James S. Coleman, "Racial Segregation in the Schools: New Research with New Policy Implications", Phi Delta Kappan, 57 (October 1975), 75-8.

5. Lawrence A. Cremin, "Public Education and the Education of the Public", in Public Education, (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1976), p. 68.

6. Christopher Jencks, Inequality, (New York: Basic Books, Inc. 1972).

7. David J. Armor, "School and Family Effects on Black and White Achievement: A Reexamination of the USEO Data", in On Equality of Educational Opportunity, (New York, Random House, 1972).

S. Bowles and H. M. Levin, "The Determinants of Scholastic Achievement - An Appraisal and Some Recent Evidence", Journal of Human Resources 3, (1968), 3-24.

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8. C. Weber, Inner-City Children Can Be Taught To Read: Four Successful Schools. (Washington, D.C.: Council for Basic Education, 1971).

State of New York, Office of Education Performance Review, School Factors Influencing Reading Achievement: A Case Study of Two Inner City Schools. March, 1974.

9. Michael Rutter, Barbara Maughan, Peter Mortimore, Janet Ouston, with Alan Smith, Fifteen Thousand Hours, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

10. James S. Coleman, "Methods and Results in the IEA Studies of the Effects of School on Learning", Review of Educational Research, 45 (1975), 335-86.